

Promise, Evidence, and Guarantee

Pentecost Weekend – June 3/4, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Acts 2:1-17 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

What are the two biggest days in the Christian calendar? Most of us would probably reply Christmas and Easter. Certainly, if the criterion is church attendance, we’d be right. But, in truth, the two days that most shape our faith are Easter and Pentecost.

After Jesus’ crucifixion, the disciples waited in fear for their own arrests. They had been confused before Jesus’ death and were even more confused afterwards. What caused them to move from fear to bravery? How could Peter possibly go from denying Jesus three times to delivering a sermon so powerful that 3,000 people came to faith in Christ in a single day? Later, how could Paul go from a violent persecutor of Jesus’ followers to Christ’s apostle to the Gentiles? The short answer is Easter and Pentecost – their personal experience of their resurrected Lord and the arrival of God’s Holy Spirit.

Promise Fulfilled – The Spirit’s Return

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus’ disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, with the population having swelled to perhaps 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God’s Spirit would come upon them with power so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus’ crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death. His resurrection had changed everything. They didn’t know what to expect, but they wouldn’t have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when “from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages” (from today’s passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power. *Returned??*

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God’s dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God’s people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God’s presence had departed the temple, “Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . .” (Ezekiel 10:18). God’s Holy Spirit is God’s empowering presence. Thus, when God was no longer present with his people as he had been, it meant that God’s Spirit had left.

Yet, though God would no longer dwell in the temple with his people, God had not forever abandoned them. God promised that one day he would put within them a new Spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). In essence, God promised that he would one day return to his temple (Malachi 3:1). Now, as the disciples sat together during Pentecost, that day had come. But it would not be as they expected!

The Spirit as Evidence

It is hard for us to grasp the significance of Pentecost because we're not even sure what we mean by the Holy Spirit. It is tempting to simply embrace the Spirit as a godly force of some kind, an electrical grid of sorts that we can plug into. But that isn't even close.

The Holy Spirit (a.k.a. "the Spirit," "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ") is not a what but a who. The Spirit is God. Not the Father and not the Son, but still God. Fully and completely God though not all of God. The Spirit is every bit as personal and genuine and God as Jesus is personal and genuine and God. In Acts, we are told about people who lie to the Spirit (Acts 5). Who lies to electricity or even to their dog? We lie to other persons.

It is in Paul's letters that we most clearly see the relationship of Easter and Pentecost. Paul refers to Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the "first fruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23). "First fruits" is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit marked the coming of God's kingdom, which has arrived already but has "not yet" been consummated.¹

Like Jesus' resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God's new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul's own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God's work had come to its climax.

The Spirit as Guarantee

Though Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit are the first fruits of God's harvest, we want to know when it is all going to be consummated. When will suffering, sickness, sin, and tragedy be swept away? Paul is no fool. He knows that there is much wrong in the world. But he sees the Spirit as the guarantee that all will be put right – that, not only will God's victory be won, it *has* been won!

Paul writes, "When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . ." (Ephesians 1:13-14 (TNIV). Again, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30, TNIV). And, "But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NRSV)."

God's Empowering Presence

The Holy Spirit is the renewed presence, the empowering presence, of God among his people – collectively and individually. This ought to take our breath away! We are Christians. We place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We have all been born from above (John 3). We have all received the Holy Spirit – collectively as the church and as individual believers. God is always with us. If it doesn't feel like it at times, it isn't because God has gone anywhere, it is because we have. God's presence, his Holy Spirit, is with us *always*.

So . . . it shouldn't surprise us when Paul urges us to show the fruit of God's ever-present Spirit working in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We are the people of the Spirit. We live by the Spirit and are to be guided by the Spirit. We have the "Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9) with us, who enables us to cry, "*Abba!* Father!" (Galatians 4:6)

In the ancient world, letters were sent on a piece of rolled up papyrus that would often be marked with the seal of the sender. If the sender's seal arrived intact, then the recipient could be sure of the sender and confident that no one had opened the letter. The Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to everyone who has faith in Jesus, is God's seal on each of his people, marking us out as belonging to God.

But the Spirit is more than a seal, the Spirit is a down payment, a first installment on all of God's promises. It is a bit like the old lay-way plan. The store would hold the merchandise as payments were made, guaranteeing that the item would one day belong to the customer.

The experience of Pentecost was not limited to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. Every Christian experiences a Pentecost of his or her own, for all Christians are empowered by the Spirit of God. Some Christians have a very powerful experience of the Holy Spirit while, for others, it is a quiet experience. But the Holy Spirit seals us *all* for God. Amen!

¹Every time I come to this topic, I get a bit nervous. The kingdom of God has come already, but not yet?? Really? In a word, yes. Both are true. How do we know this? Because God resurrected Jesus and the Spirit has returned (already), though we still live in a world marred by sin and suffering (not yet). The June 29, 2003, Sermon Background Study has the basics on this including a couple of helpful diagrams. The study can be found at www.standrewcl.org.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

June 4 - June 10

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 2 Samuel 18-20; Psalm 75 The death of Absalom and a father's grief. David takes back his throne.</p>	<p>Day 2 2 Samuel 21-24; Psalm 76 David's song of thanksgiving and an accounting of David's warriors; David sins against God.</p>
<p>Day 3 Colossians; Psalm 77 The absolute supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ; encouragement for the Christians to continue with what they were taught</p>	<p>Day 4 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Kings 1-3; Psalm 78:1-39 David dies and his son, Solomon, takes the throne, praying to God for wisdom.</p>	<p>Day 6 1 Kings 4-6; Psalm 78:40-72 Solomon is a wise king under whom the wealth and power of Israel grows; Solomon builds God's temple in Jerusalem</p>
<p>Day 7 1 Kings 7-9; Psalm 79 Details on Solomon's palace and the dedication of the temple</p>	

Sermon Notes

June Book Recommendation

Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

John Wesley's theological brilliance can be seen in his unerring commitment to the "both/ands" of the Christian faith. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. We are saved AND we are being saved. These and many other Christian claims are not choices, they are truths that we must sustain even if we don't fully grasp the mystery. This book is a slender introduction to the Wesley brothers' proclamations of the Good News. You will be introduced to the writings of John and to the theology of Charles' hymns. You will see how the Wesley brothers sought to hold on to the vital tension between faith and works, Word and Spirit, the personal and the social, and more.

The book is well-organized into four sections of two chapters each. Questions for reflection and discussion are provided at the end of each chapter, making this book very suitable for a Sunday School class or other small group.

***Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore, has copies of the CD recordings of a two-week class on *The Da Vinci Code* that Scott Engle recorded in 2004. This is a two-CD set and costs \$5.**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Do you agree with my statement that the Christian faith is built upon Easter and Pentecost? Why or why not?

How would you tell someone else about the Holy Spirit? How would you help them to see that the Spirit is not a "what" but a "who?" Why is this so hard for us to really understand?

Have you experienced the Spirit in your own life? Here is another way to phrase it. Have you experienced God in your own life? Have there been times when you felt especially close to God, when a Scripture passage had an especially profound effect on you, or when you felt God tugging at you? Those are all experiences of the Spirit. When we speak of God with us, we are speaking of the Spirit. When you see God at work in your own life or in the world you are seeing the Holy Spirit/Spirit of God/Spirit of Christ at work. The Spirit is God's presence.

What does it mean to you for Paul to say that you are marked for God with a seal, the Holy Spirit? How could we make this more concrete? How is it a guarantee of your place in the people of God? What does this seal convey about your future?

Finally, you might talk about Paul's metaphor of the Spirit being the down payment/first installment on our promised future with God and one another. Why do you think that this guarantee is so important to Paul?